

EMP

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

Preface

These are my recollections from our project. Early on in the process I had a chat with our official project scribe. When I complained that her account, while technically accurate, had no soul, she “encouraged” me to keep my own. Thanks for the suggestion, Penny. And thanks for the editing help. I promise not to use passive voice ever again.

As I said, these are my recollections, and are bound to be full of misconceptions and just plain mistakes; blame me. I’ve never worked with a better group of people, so dedicated, bright, and committed.

I will update this from time to time and included it in the project archives. I’ll clean it up, with professional help, prior to going public.

At least that is the plan.

If you are reading it in this form, it means something serious has happened. May God have mercy on our souls.

Alpha and Beta

We tested the first device in the California desert in late June. It was small, the active portion the size of a soft drink can. In fact, it had started life as a can of Baron's Ginseng Ginger Ale. The output was impressive, even for our first prototype. We figured the pulse output was in the low terajoule range.

I'll explain a bit. Take a look at an incandescent light bulb near you; it's rated at 60 to 100 watts, not a lot of power. If you use a hair drier or microwave oven, both of those come in at around 1200 watts, or 1.2 kilowatts. Oh, if you're an automotive buff, that's around 1.6 horsepower. A terawatt is 1,000,000,000,000 watts, or ten to the twelfth power watts, a billion times more power than your microwave.

This is a lot of power. Part of the beauty of it (if you'll pardon the phrase) is how time-compressed our pulses are. Think of that 100 watt light bulb again. Think of the heat and light it produces over 1000 hours of its useful life; that's 100,000 watt hours, or 100 kilowatt hours, or 0.1 megawatt hours. A lot of energy, yes? That bulb is fairly bright, and hot, isn't it? Now think of how bright and hot it would be if you could get it to release its entire output not in 1000 hours, or one hour, but in .0000000000001 seconds. For that very brief moment, that light bulb would be far brighter and hotter than the sun. You wouldn't want to be nearby. That's what our devices do; release massive amounts of power in very short times.

One of our many problems was measuring that kind of power. You can't just call up a company such as EG&G and say, "Hi, I'm part of a group of free thinkers designing electromagnetic pulse weapons. What do you have for measuring fast, hot pulses?"

I don't remember who came up with the idea, but it was a good one. We got cheap LCD watches from an importer, a few thousand at under a half dollar each. Use hot glue to attach them to three orthogonal sides of a 2 inch Styrofoam cube. Put the cube on a bamboo stick, and stick it in the ground. You've got a power sensor for under two dollars. We "calibrated" them with a pulse microwave power source, figuring out how much energy to took to fry them along each axis.

We'd done a great deal of modeling prior to the first test, but there were just so many variables involved; field strengths, explosive power, shock wave travel, confinement time, and more, including luck. We finally took guesses at low power and high power, then increased that for the maximum high power.

I'll never forget that meeting. We'd debated, and modeled, and debated, but knew it would come down to estimates. Each of us wrote an estimate on a slip of paper and put it in a box. Davy, lead for the confinement team, picked them out one by one and read them. I was the scribe. The first number had us elated; Davy announced, "4.3 TJ." That was definitely on the high and optimistic side. The next slip of paper brought us back down to earth with a crash: "Zero." I wondered how many of us thought it wouldn't work.

There were only two zeros in the batch; one was mine. We settled on a low of 1.8 TJ, a high of 4.3, with our orgasmic delight number pegged at 5 even.

The first test, alpha, was at dawn on the last Saturday in June.

Dawn in the California desert; cool. We'd been up all night working, setting up, placing 240 sensors in concentric rings around the device. We expected it to produce a dipole pattern, a figure-8. We'd get a power estimate from counting dead watches.

We also had more accurate measurement equipment, but we put that out a ways, as it was a bit too expensive to fry on the first shot. We also had eight mice, anesthetized so we didn't have to use cages. They were set out last, each in its own hollowed-out Styrofoam holder. Some experimental calorimeters were added at the last minute; their design looked pretty good, and their design team really wanted to try. After much impassioned debate, I put my weight behind them; they were on as a secondary measurement.

The site looked really weird; all these strange white flowers sticking straight up from the desert floor, surrounding a Styrofoam picnic cooler on a wooden tripod. The liquid nitrogen fog trailing off the cooler added to the eerie scene.

We drew straws to see who got the honor of triggering the alpha device. Actually, the honor was mostly ceremonial -- the button was the final safety; actual initiation was triggered by radio to synchronize our data gathering. Carol, our leading lady physicist, won. She has a unique sense of humor. When she got the thumbs up, she said, "Namaste" and hit the button. "Namaste-" I greet you in peace. That summarizes pretty well our motives, in spite of what you may have read to the contrary.

We got a nice "Whump" and the cooler disappeared. As far as explosions go, it wasn't much. I don't remember if I felt anything or not; we were all supposed to watch ourselves for unusual sensations. Carl, watching the monitoring equipment, let out a whoop of joy. I grabbed my radio out of the closed metal box and turned it on. It still worked. Was that good news or bad news? "Teams go," I heard from the radio.

"Team one on the way," I said as I waved my partners on. We ran our route, picking up the sensor cubes and calorimeters and dumping them into sacks. We got two rings in and noticed quite a few of the LCD's were dead, first on the main axis, then main and secondary, then all three. We had a winner. Another two rings in and every sensor we picked up was dead on all three axes. We had two mice on our route; I picked them up; both were alive. We were unsure of the effects of EMP on living systems; funny how you can't find many reports in the open literature on that.

I took pictures as I went. The cooler was gone; we could see little bits of it. We all had the additional task of picking up any bit of debris that you could spot. We weren't going to sweep the area with a fine-tooth comb, but we weren't going to deliberately leave any large chunks for someone to work on.

We ran back to the command site; the equipment was pretty much packed up when we got there. We helped hustle the remaining stuff into the equipment van, then piled in the second van to drive back to our campsite. The other teams would meet us there.

We were still panting as we bounced along in the van. I ended sitting next to Carol. She finally said, “Carl won’t talk. How did it look?” I gave her a squeeze. “Awesome. Everything inside ring 6 was zilch.”

She frowned. “The mice?”

I took them out of the cloth carrier and showed her. They were starting to move a little. I looked up at her; we both smiled. “We’ll know after Kenny has a look at them,” I told her, and put the mice back.

As we bounced along the desert floor, two of the team in back were recording sensor data. The calorimeters needed special equipment to interpret them, but all you had to do with the watches was look. We could hear them; one person pulling a sensor out of the bag, reading off the number indicating where it was, and then three digits, each a 1 or a 0, 1 for alive, 0 for dead, in x-y-z order. The other person logged the data in a portable computer. I’d been awake far too long; I leaned against Carol’s shoulder and zoned out. I remember numbers going by; anything from the inner rings was “zilch,” shorthand for all zeros, all three axes dead.

I awoke with a bump as we reached base camp in the mountains. The base crew was cheering; I guess the quick-look telemetry worked. I gave Carol a kiss and we hopped out; actually she hopped out and helped me. I helped unload, and the beta team took over repacking for the second test at dusk if the alpha numbers looked good. The data logging crew was already consolidating information from the other teams; we were the second of four to get back to base.

Carol quickly joined the rest of the physicists as they started downloading and comparing data to models; they’d be arguing for a few hours at least. The calorimeter crew grabbed their goodies and hustled off.

I’m part of the instrumentation/telemetry crew, as well as being unofficial project scribe. I’m also one of the founders, sort of a mascot. I went to the radio tent and put in some time on the radio; it was our cover after all.

The last weekend in June is called “Field Day” for ham radio operators. It’s a weekend-long contest where the goal is to set up equipment at some field location, and talk to as many other hams as you can. What better cover for getting together a bunch of people and high tech equipment? It would be interesting to see what our little “experiment” did to the radio bands; that was one of my pet projects, and actually an important part of calculating overall pulse density, shape, and power. We should have ripped a hole in the electromagnetic spectrum from one end to the other. If everyone’s work had come together, there should have been an incredible amount of energy released in those first few nanoseconds. From what I saw, there was.

I got into the swing of the radio thing; I do enjoy contests. It was one of the weird dichotomies in our project; so much emphasis on minimizing communications, security, radio blackouts, ad nauseam, and then sit around and try and tell as many people in the world as you can who you are and where you’re located.

Somebody brought me breakfast; I ate as I worked through the 20 meter ham band again.

Gradually I noticed a crowd gathering. It must be close to 8AM. Ian, one of our founders couldn't be with us; he was in the throes of chemotherapy and couldn't make the trip. Since he was also a ham, we scheduled a call at 8 to give him our first results.

I reached down and turned on the power amplifier for the radio I was using, and had the directional antenna pointed to his location. For this contact, I'd be running 2000 watts. How many orders of magnitude was alpha over that? I'd know soon.

I made a few contacts in that part of the country to make sure things were working. Loud and clear; I had a good signal. I parked on our scheduled frequency and waited for 8 on the nose. The other radio operators cleared their equipment.

I looked around. The whole crew was there. Carol was holding a folded slip of paper; she had tears in her eyes. Davy looked quite somber. Carl was giddy. I don't know how I felt. Did Oppenheimer know, deep down inside, what was going to be done with the genie he helped unleash? We had definite goals and plans; serious stuff, if we could pull it off.

As the clock approached eight, I got another chair and put it beside me. I gave Carol a big hug and sat her down next to me. I switched from using the headset to a hand mike and the loudspeaker so everyone could hear. A few people put recorders down on the table next to me.

I started making my call right at eight. After a few seconds Ian came back. I asked him if he was ready to copy. He was. The room, the whole camp, was silent as I turned to Carol. She handed me the slip of paper and I opened it. It had four numbers on it. The first three were figures of merit for the radiation pattern, pulse width, and rise time. These were scaled 0 to 100 to our models: the higher the number, the better the agreement with our models. The last number was estimated power in terajoules.

"Numbers are: alpha 65, beta 85, delta, 70, gamma 3.1. I repeat: alpha 65, beta 85, delta 70, gamma 3.1. How do you copy?" A weak but proud voice came back to us: "I copy alpha 65, beta 85, delta, 70, gamma 3 decimal 1. I repeat: alpha 65, beta 85, delta 70, gamma 3 decimal 1. I confirm your 8A SJV. Congratulations and good luck in the contest. Signing off."

Pandemonium broke out. 3.1 terajoules, and closer to our modeled parameters than any one of us would have believed possible. I hugged Carol. We had the traditional celebration of the high energy physicist: champagne in Styrofoam cups. When everyone had a cup, silence descended on the group once more, and everyone turned to me, even Carol. I guess I was the senior member of the project here.

I'd deliberately not thought of what to say ahead of time. I thought again of Robert Oppenheimer, quoting the Bhagavad Gita: "Now I am become Death, Destroyer of Worlds." My father had heard Oppenheimer speak those words, out on a similar desert a little over fifty years ago. What would dad and Oppie think of our project?

I looked at the group, filling the communications tent and surrounding it. "It works. We've completed the second phase of a long, difficult project. Congratulations to you all for your hard work. May God have mercy on us." I raised my glass, and we drank silently.

Then I yelled out, “Bravo team, I want a briefing on your status for the second test at 08:45. I expect to see modified detector layouts based on the first shot results. I want to see the Alpha team leaders at 09:00 for a review of that shot. Where’s my telemetry status? How are my mice? What happened to that radiation pattern? How did those calorimeters work? I put my ass on the line for you guys! Let’s get back to work, we’ve got a world to save here, people!”

I got cheers, grumbles, applause, whistles, and a big hug from Carol. I also got a hug from Carl; he was no longer giddy. Davy shook my hand.

The crowd dissipated as teams reassembled for the next steps. Kenny came in smiling. “I heard that remark; I couldn’t get through the crowd. The mice look fine. I’ll keep you updated. No reports from any of the on-site teams of effects.”

I put my arm around him. “Thanks, Kenny. I appreciate it. I think we were a bit preoccupied to look for effects; I’ll put a reminder on that into the Beta shot briefing.”

He gave me a hug, then put a hand on my face and looked at my eyes. “Get some rest. Doctor’s orders.”

I laughed. “Thank you, Doctor. I’ll take that under advisement.”

Anita, our radio lead smiled and gave me a hug. “Congratulations. Now get out of my tent; I’ve got a contest and a p-p team to run.”

I laughed and stepped outside. Things had returned to their usual chaos, people scrambling around, the beta and gamma teams getting ready. I could hear at least three different arguments (sorry, “technical discussions”) going on. But for a moment at least, I was left to my own.

What we’d done wasn’t new. The Russians had been working on electromagnetic pulse weapons for at least twenty five years. It was common knowledge that the US had them deployed in cruise missiles; there evidently had been quite a debate on whether or not to use them in the first Gulf Unpleasantness -- the propeller heads wanted to, but the folks in the field weren’t willing to risk people’s lives on it. Test reports had made their way into a couple of journals, among them Aviation Week. Our surveys and hopefully discreet looking around lead us to believe that besides the U.S. and former U.S.S.R, Israel had them aplenty; France, India, and Pakistan were also likely.

EMP weapons are a threat for high technology targets. They are an outgrowth of early atomic bomb testing. People noticed that the bomb produced a very large electromagnetic pulse that crippled electronics over a wide radius. A “small” blast at about 250 miles altitude caused EMP damage on Oahu, over 800 miles away. That had been “Starfish Prime” in the early 1960’s. A ten megaton blast at fifty miles altitude or so would damage or destroy anything more sophisticated than a flashlight over many thousands of square miles.

You can protect against EMP; the military does. It costs money, and adds weight. You basically seal everything inside a metal box, but that makes it very difficult to get wires in and

out. You have to carefully filter every wire, every opening. Or, you can go for redundancy and keep your backup systems sealed in metal containers and pull them out just prior to use. That's what we'd done with our radios at the test earlier.

My thoughts were interrupted by one of our young scientists, a man in his mid twenties. He was standing patiently in front of me holding a clipboard, waiting for me to return to earth. I smiled.

"Doctor?" he asked overly politely, "I think you should look at the calorimeter data, please if you have the time, sir."

I waved him over to a picnic table. These people have way too much respect for me. We sat down and he started jabbering. I half-listened while I looked over his plots. He'd gotten the alpha shot quick-look data, with the LCD sensor results on it in black and white -- pretty good data representation; they only told you alive or dead. What impressed me was his color overlay of the calorimeter data. It was good, very good. It gave me a lot more information. I took a pen from my pocket and started sketching contours on the plot from his data. His jabbering almost went off the scale, and he quickly gave me another plot showing just the contours I was sketching. This was the kind of information we needed. The calorimeters had been added at the last minute as a purely secondary measurement. That was about to change.

I looked up at him; his eyes were wide and he was jabbering faster than anyone could follow; as he had started speaking, his speech had gotten faster, higher in pitch, and his Indian accent returned.

I finally made a big "T" with my hands, right in front of his face: time out. He stopped talking and panted.

"These are wonderful. How many calorimeters can you have ready for the beta shot?"

His eyes got wider and I thought he might pass out. A voice from behind me said, "We can have three hundred ready by this evening, Doctor, and at least four hundred more for the morning."

I turned to see where the voice came from: a very serious looking gal with short red hair: June. She'd come to us from CERN in Geneva.

"Good. Go round up Ahmed, beta shot leader. Get him over here a minute ago. I don't care if you have to drag him off the can. Do it."

She gave me a big smile, said, "Yes Sir!" and took off. I turned back to my original briefer. Damn, I should remember his name. I was supposed to know everybody on this project. Maybe Kenny was right; I did need some rest. Of course Kenny was right; I was far beyond being beat, but I didn't have time for that.

Ahmed came up moments later. "What is it?" he asked. The jabbering started again, completely unintelligible. I put my hand on Paul's shoulder. That's it, he liked to be called Paul. He quieted down. I had Ahmed sit between us on the bench. I showed him the calorimeter data.

“Ahmed,” I told him, “I think the calorimeters should be our primary for your shot. Look how much information they’ve gotten.” I turned to Paul again. “Have Carol and the physics team seen this?” He was still hyperventilating, wide and wild eyed. June, the redhead, was back and said, “No, I’ll get her a copy right away.”

I gave her a smile and said, “Thanks -- tell her I think she should look at it right away.”

As she trotted off, I saw Kenny going by. “Kenny!” I hollered and waved him over. He started to ask “What?” as I pointed to Paul. Kenny smiled and went to his side. As Kenny stood him up to walk him away, I stood and took his hand. “Paul, you’ve made a valuable contribution to the success of the project. Thank you. Go with the doctor, please.”

I sat down and talked with Ahmed a bit. When I told him it was his decision, he actually laughed at me! “No, my friend, the decision has already been made.” He turned to June, who was back again. “June, we need to find Tony -- he has a new sensor lead for our shot. We need to rethink deployment, and we have...” he glanced at his watch, “twenty four minutes to do it before we have to report back to our slave driver here.”

June was practically hopping up and down.

“Take your time,” I told them, “Take twenty six minutes.”

June scooped up the remaining plots and the clipboard and went off with Ahmed.

That was a big part of our success -- everyone working so well together, willing to take risks and listen to new approaches. We’d still use the watches; they’d be backup now. We could double our sensor density, or did we want to? I’ll see what they have to say in a while.

I put my head down on my arms to rest for a few minutes. Someone came up and massaged my neck and shoulders; I don’t know who. They started without asking. I hope someone got a photo of that; I’d like to thank them.

Then there was a hand on my shoulder, and Carol’s voice. “Dad? Time for the review.”

I sat up, a little groggy and stiff. I looked at my watch; it was nine o’clock! “Why didn’t someone wake me for the beta status? What’s going on here?”

Kenny stepped beside Carol and put his arm around her waist. “I wouldn’t let them,” he told me.

“I wouldn’t let them either, dad. You needed the rest,” Carol chimed in.

When your daughter is the lead physicist and her husband is the medical lead on the project, it’s hard to argue. Hell, it’s impossible; I didn’t even bother fuming. I sighed and held out my arms. “Help an old man stand up, kids.”

They pulled me to my feet with more hugging than was necessary, but definitely what I needed. As we walked to the command tent I asked, “So how do we look?”

Carol answered as she rubbed my back with one hand. “Beta looks good, dad. The calorimeter data from alpha was tremendous. They’ve worked out a new sensor layout for beta that will give us a lot more information. We may be able to go on to the next series sooner than we’d expected.”

I hadn’t thought of that. Our goals for the first series of shots, alpha, beta, gamma, and delta, were to prove out the basic design and establish measurement techniques. The calorimeters certainly gave us that. The second series was yield enhancement techniques; increase the pinch and boost the power by a factor of fifty or more.

“You think so?” I asked her.

“Yes, if beta flies, I think so. We’ll have met the goals for this phase.”

Hard to argue with logic like that, especially coming from your daughter. I was very proud of her. Hell, I was very proud of everyone on our team. That thought straightened my back and took ten years off me. I walked into the command tent feeling great.

I sat at the camp table with Carol next to me. Kenny stood behind her. I turned to Kenny and said, “Ken -- get Ahmed, Lucy, head of the brain fart team, and what’s-his-name, the one with the mustache -- Bob -- head of wild weasel, and tell them to be in here at nine fifteen.”

Kenny nodded and took off. I turned to the rest of the table and got some strange looks. Carol was smiling. “Well, how did we do?” I asked our assembled bunch.

Everyone agreed the experimental calorimeters had worked beyond our wildest dreams; they’d worked the numbers back through the MAGY models, and the physics team thought beta should come in within five percent of the model. The beta team was working to tune their device; they expected to be able to get more power, given the alpha shot results. We went around the table, section by section sharing results. I was amazed; we had no outright failures. We had some experimental devices that didn’t work as we thought they would, and deviations from our models, but we learned from that. There were none of the, “Oops, I forgot to connect the batteries,” or instruments set on the wrong scale kind of goofs, or results completely orthogonal to expectations.

We finished going around the table at about nine twenty. Ahmed had joined us, as had the leaders for the next generation devices, code named brain fart and wild weasel.

I started with Ahmed. “Thanks for the nap. Don’t let it happen again. What’s your status?”

After the laughter died down, helped by the nasty look I got from my wonderful daughter, Ahmed told us.

“We’re ready. We have a new sensor deployment that should let us drown the data analysis team. The calorimeters are great; you were right, as usual. We’re tweaking device parameters based on the alpha results; we should be able to get a bit more power. We agree alpha may have had bubbles in one of their explosive lenses resulting in the skewed radiation pattern; we are rechecking ours. We also think we understand the deviation in pulse width; it’s an interesting interaction. I could be sure if we had some lithium to add. Do you know where we could get a few kilograms on a weekend, preferably in thin sheets, very pure?”

That got laughter from the crowd; I was also the semiofficial group scrounge, obtainer of the unobtainable. I replied, “Well, Lawrence Liver Labs is only a few hours away; I’m sure they have what we need. Maybe if we told them what we were doing they’d give us some.”

That got more laughter. Then I turned to Bob and Lucy. Things quieted down.

“Assuming beta comes in on the numbers, and I’m sure it will, which one of you crazies is going to be ready to go at the crack of dawn tomorrow?”

Bob and Lucy sucked air and looked at each other. Bob started rambling on about something; I quickly made my “time out” sign. “Bob, yes or no?” He sighed and said, “No.”

I gave him a smile. “Thank you. I appreciate your honesty. Lucy?”

She grinned ear to ear. “We’re ready to blow your socks off.”

I looked around the table. Everyone else was smiling. “Any objections?” I asked. Silence. “Really?” I asked again, letting my voice rise in pitch. That got mild laughter.

“Okay. Here’s how it goes, until someone convinces me otherwise. Lucy, you’re tentatively on for dawn, but gamma is still running as primary. You can cannibalize anything you want from alpha and wild weasel -- supplies or personnel. Any personnel moves have to be run through Kenny; I don’t want anyone else burned out. We make the decision two hours after the beta shot. There is no penalty for backing out. I repeat, no penalty. You can come to me privately and tell me you’re not ready, and we’ll go with gamma as planned. Any of you can come to me privately and tell me I’m crazy for jumping ahead this fast. After we’ve reviewed the beta quick-look data, we’ll decide. The alpha shot proved the design. We may want to see more data from gamma. We won’t know until we see the beta shot. Lucy, you need to get with June and the calorimeter folks on sensor deployment; they’re our primary. That’s my recommendation anyway.”

I looked around the room again; no voiced objections. “Okay, Doctor Lucy, you and your team are on the fast track for tomorrow at dawn. Hope you’re well rested. Get moving.”

She bowed a little and said, “Thank you, Doctor,” very formally and turned and walked calmly out of the tent. A few seconds after she walked out we heard a very loud whoop of joy. I laughed; we all did.

Our meeting broke up after a few more minutes. I headed to the food tent. “I need a cup of coffee,” I announced to nobody in particular. Then I saw June, moving in a big hurry from

unknown point A to equally unknown point B. “June!” I called out. She stopped and I waved her over. We sat on a bench just outside the command tent. Kenny said, “I’ll get you something to drink.”

June was looking frazzled already. I took one of her hands. “Rule one, “ I told her, “never run. If your people think you’re freaking out, they will too. Even if you can’t stay calm, at least look calm.”

She frowned and said, “But I’ve...”

I interrupted. “Rule two, delegate. Delegate and deputize. Grab some of the alpha sensor folks -- they’re singing your praises. Just check with Kenny. Got that?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Enough of this Doctor stuff - call me Dan, or dad, but not Doctor; I’m just a worn-out old engineer. What I really want you to think about is the brain fart shot tomorrow. I think that’s our future. I want *you*, not one of your team, but *you*, since you know these things better than anyone else, to think about sensor deployment for brain fart. I want you to think about using everything you have. Talk to the brain fart people. Talk to the physics people. What will give us the most information? Talk to the data analysis and modeling folks, too -- make sure it’s information they can use. We’re probably not going to do a test shot for another four months at least, so we need something to mull over.”

Kenny handed me a cup. I took a sip. “I wanted coffee!” I looked up at him; he was smiling, and Kendra and Miranda, two of our security team leads were with him. “No you didn’t,” he told me. It was 7-Up, and it tasted good. I was thirsty. I drank it down. Then I had a bad thought.

“Did you drug me, you quack?” I accused him. I’d seen him do it before to people that hadn’t taken his repeated advice on getting rest; I had given him my blessing on that, in fact.

“No, but I will right here, if you won’t come peacefully,” he told me. Kendra flexed her muscles; she’s a rower and a martial arts fanatic, and the sister of one of the explosives people. She’s all muscle; so is Miranda. They run a dojo together. I wouldn’t want either one of them upset with me.

I looked at June and sighed overly loud. “I’m outnumbered again. Have fun and remember what I said. Don’t walk fast, or he’ll get after you.” I hooked a thumb at Kenny.

She smiled at me. “Thanks, D... Dad.” She got up and headed off, slower this time.

“Alright, help me up and tuck me in.”

Kendra and Miranda helped me up and walked me to my tent, Kenny following behind.

"I'd love to wrestle a while with you two, if we could keep my daughter distracted," I told them. They giggled. That's the problem with getting old -- they don't know when you're serious anymore.

I went in the tent followed by my honor guard. I sat on my bunk and took off my sweat shirt; Miranda took off my boots. Kendra stepped behind me and started kneading my shoulders and neck. I closed my eyes.

"So you're the one? That was wonderful this morning..."

And then I felt something cold on my arm. I looked down to see Kenny wiping my arm with a swab, syringe in his hand. "But you told me..." I started to say to him.

He smiled. "I lied. Don't worry; we'll wake you for dinner."

"At least let me lay down first." I leaned back on the cot, and then on impulse said, "Miranda, hold me, please." She surprised me by holding me wonderfully. It took the sting out of my son-in-law's needle.

"Time to wake up, time to wake up." I opened my eyes to see Miranda leaning over me, gently massaging my shoulders and neck. I reached up and pulled her down on top of me, nestling my head between her young, soft breasts. She held me. I let go of her, and she sat up. I sat up too, with her help, and wiped tears from my eyes. "Thank you. I needed that."

She kissed my forehead and stood up. "You've got time for a hot shower before dinner if you want."

"Will you scrub my back?" I asked her.

She laughed. "I'll have to check with your doctor first."

"Well, as long as you check with the doctor and not his wife, I may be okay... A shower sounds great."

I peeled off my socks and got my sandals. Miranda dug out clean undies and a T-shirt, and my shower stuff.

"Where's the shower set up?" I asked her. We were in a wilderness area; we'd brought in our own porta potties, water, food, generators, liquid nitrogen, everything you need for a quiet weekend of testing the next generation in high-tech weapons. Luckily, hams had been using this site for decades on field day, so it wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

"Over there," she pointed to the trees. "The rapid disassembly people rigged it up."

I laughed. When we named the teams early on, we had a physics team, a sensor team, quite a few teams. The group responsible for putting the device together was the assembly team. The explosives group insisted on being called rapid disassembly.

I had a good shower, my first in a few days. I left my “key” on its chain around my neck; I carried one of the three electronic keys that were used to control access to all our records. It never left me.

The rest had done me good. I was also starving. I dried off, with great help from both Kendra and Miranda. I ended up dry, and they ended up wet, at least in strategic places. They looked as if they’d been in a wet T-shirt contest. They would have won.

I entered the main camp with a beautiful and damp young lady on each arm, and a smile on my face.

And everyone in the area heard my daughter’s sweet lyric voice ring out loudly over the campground, “Why you dirty old man!”

As the crowd laughed, cheered, and applauded, I bowed and turned to Miranda. “You’ve been convicted -- you might as well commit the crime.”

She smiled, but Kendra spun me around grabbed me, and gave me one hell of a kiss. It ended with me sandwiched between Kendra and Miranda. More cheering and applause, and the ladies had to help me to the table; my knees were weak.

Carol and Kenny came over to me, Carol with a plate of food, and Kenny with a glass of white wine. They were both still laughing. My escorts had queued up for food.

Carol shook her head and said, “Dad... I can’t believe you some times.”

I told her, “Man does not live by bread alone...” I wiggled my eyebrows and looked at Kenny. “Right, son?”

He laughed, and Carol joined in. They sat next to me. “How do you feel?” Carol asked.

“I feel much better. I did need the rest. But I would have taken it on my own, honest!”

Kenny put his arm around me, as did Carol. Kenny said, “We love you, but we don’t believe you. You need to take it easy tonight if you want to go out for the shot tomorrow.”

I dug into the salad. “I was actually thinking about watching it from the ridge. Depends on what June has to say. How is she doing? Did the beta team get off okay?”

Carol said, “June is holding her own. She started delegating like crazy; you must have given her quite a few pages from your book. She’s got some wild ideas for brain fart, and she says you’ve blessed them; she’s got the analysis people in a turmoil.”

I dug into the tri-tip; it was great, a little pink in the middle, just as I like it. “I told her to use everything she’s got, but to talk with analysis and physics to make sure it’s data we can use.”

“She’s done that, and brilliantly. She’s got data analysis thinking of ways to squeeze more information out of the samples we already have. We had to get her to stop tinkering with the beta layout; they had to hit the road.”

I had a sip of the wine. I’d prefer red with beef, but this was good. I wondered for a moment how it got good and cold, then remembered how much liquid nitrogen we had with us.

“So the beta team got off okay?”

“Yes, on schedule. We’ll get a report when they complete sensor deploy. Everything is nominal for the shot.”

“How about Lucy and her brain fart group?”

Carol and Kenny both laughed. Carol spoke first. “She’s in hog heaven. Even with June getting in there, they are having a lot of fun. They’ll be ready.”

Kenny chimed in. “I’ve got people from alpha wanting to help, and pissed when I won’t let them. Even the delta crew wants to get in on the action. Gamma is getting pretty depressed though; they can see the writing on the wall.”

For an old guy, I catch on pretty quick some times. “Maybe we should put some of the gamma folks on the beta shot, then.”

Carol and Kenny were beaming, and holding each other’s hands, squeezing them behind my back.

“I guess I’m glad I suggested it. Thanks for reminding me.”

Carol laughed and said, “We still have enough for gamma if it’s needed. We’ve held back part of the alpha crew; they’ll be rested and ready to go. We’ve just about doubled up on sensor deploy and retrieval. It will get us in and out quicker. Same for whatever shot we do tomorrow; double up on sensor deploy and retrieval. You concur?”

I had a mouth full of meat and good San Francisco sourdough bread. “Yes. I also think we should lose the watches and just go with calorimeters. Any word from the p-squared squad?”

P-squared was Anita and our group of “professional paranoids.” Their job was to look for trouble and find it before it found us; they were the high-tech branch of the security team.

Kenny spoke this time. “They want to move up the shot tomorrow morning by six minutes to minimize satellite coverage. Other than that, nominal. They’re whining that the high-power transmitters from the contest stations make intelligence gathering difficult.”

Our shots were timed to minimize coverage from overhead satellites, at least the ones that were cataloged. “Six minutes sounds fine; we should do it. That reminds me, I want to be in front of a spectrum analyzer for the beta shot; I want to see what it does to our luminiferous ether.”

“No problem. We’ll get you a front row seat,” said Carol. Kenny gave me a strange look.

“Ask Carol about it. It’s like the ether you sawbones used to work with -- it caused fuzzy thinking for a long time, until people figured out it didn’t exist. How’s Paul doing?”

Kenny smiled. “I expect him to sleep through until tomorrow morning; he’ll be fine. We only have three people on our close-watch list now.”

“Am I still on it?” I asked.

“You’re always on it, dad... No, you’re safe for now, as long as you get some rest tonight. June and Lucy seem to be doing quite well; I expect them to last through until noon tomorrow then drop. If Lucy doesn’t get a nap shortly after the decision, I may help her.”

“Okay, if you think it’s best, but I’d rather have her running on adrenaline and youth than be groggy. Maybe Janet could help.”

“Yes, I understand.”

My escorts returned to the table with an incredible amount of food. Kendra gave Kenny a nasty look and said, “Doctor Miller,” as if she’d caught him picking his nose or worse. Carol and Kenny got up. Kenny walked away, but Carol went around to the girls. She leaned over and whispered in Kendra’s ear. Kendra laughed, and Miranda blushed. Carol walked away, saying, “See you later, dad... Have fun.”

“What lies is she spreading about me now?” I asked.

Miranda started to say something, then looked away and covered her left ear. I hadn’t noticed it, but both girls were wearing their radios. I looked; they were also wearing their handguns.

Miranda said, “Beta shot sensor deploy complete and checked. All green, shot in 15 minutes.”

I started to get up, but Kendra came around the table and sat down next to me. She put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me down, gently but firmly. “Sit. Eat. Or would you like me to feed you?”

I turned and looked at her, smiling. Would I ever... If she could read my mind, at least she wasn’t embarrassed. She said softly, “Later. We’ll take good care of you. Doctor’s orders.”

I said, “I hope it isn’t just orders...”

Miranda almost choked on a mouthful of food.

We ate in relative peace. The only time someone tried to approach, sweet young Kendra gave them one of the most poisonous looks I've ever seen in my life! They went away. We finished our meal. Carol came by and said, "Your ringside seat is ready."

The three of us stood up. Miranda grabbed the plates. "I'd like a cup of 7-up if you have the time," I said to her. She looked back at me and smiled. "Well, ladies?" I asked, extending my arms. Carol took my right, and Kendra my left, and we walked over to the sensor tent.

We had a rack full of Agilent spectrum analyzers; almost three hundred thousand dollars worth of hardware connected to another sixty grand worth of calibrated antennas on the ridge. I got a seat in front of a big flat panel display. Jeff, who was running the station, gave me the run-down. We were looking at broad chunks of the radio spectrum, and some narrow chunks of specific interest as well. The test and calibration runs were complete. Sequencing and data collection was automatic from here on. I looked at the displays and saw the amateur radio bands. Our transmitters put big spikes on the display; they would go into radio silence right before the shot, and go back on the air a few seconds after. The shot clock was in the upper right hand corner of the display.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and a cup of cold 7-Up was placed in my hand. I took a sip.

At minus fifteen seconds the large spikes dropped off as our transmitters went silent. I saw spikes on the display at around 430 megahertz. I pointed and asked, "What's that one?"

Jeff looked and said, "That's the command interlink with the device."

I was impressed. That link used milliwatts -- we only needed to cover a kilometer or so, and it was a ways from here.

I watched the shot clock. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and felt and heard Kendra's voice in my ear. "Don't hold your breath; breathe normally and relax your stomach."

My guardian angel; I took a deep breath and moved my shoulders; her strong warm hand stayed where it was.

I knew what it would look like, but it was still surprising, shocking. The shot clock went to zero and all the screens completely filled with grass -- that's what you call tall spikes on the display. The red "overload" lights lit up on three of the spectrum analyzers. The displays held for a bit; I spotted the primary and secondary humps where I expected them, and then the displays went back to real-time. We had another good shot. I watched and saw another set of spikes in the 430 band. Jeff piped in with, "That's quick-look telemetry from the remote site. We have good data... Sensor teams starting their pick up runs; everything green."

I took another deep breath, and a swig of my drink. Jeff said, with wonder in his voice, "Quick-look estimates nine to nine and a half!"

I looked around for Carol -- nine plus? Three times the yield of alpha? Was alpha low, beta high, or was their tweaking that good? I wanted answers -- all of a sudden I wasn't sure whether it would be gamma or brain fart at dawn. I closed my eyes and let my head fall back. It

stopped on Kendra, still standing behind me. She started massaging my shoulders and neck again. I just sat there breathing, letting it happen. Just slow down, I told myself -- you can't make decisions without information, and the information won't be available for a while yet.

Someone asked, "Director, are you okay? Is there anything I can get you?"

Director -- that's a new one. "No," I said slowly, enjoying the attention I was getting, "Some times the best thing you can do is just stay the hell out of people's way and let them do their jobs."

Another voice in the tent said, "Amen to that!"

I chuckled a bit and let Kendra do her job.

New Keys

I rested where I was for a while, half listening to the people working around me, enjoying resting against Kendra with my eyes closed. I stirred after a while; it had to be hard on her standing in the same place for so long. I started to sit up, but she held my shoulders and said, “Relax.”

I replied, “I have to pee.” The gambit of the very young and very old worked again. Would I ever live to see grandkids?

She released me and said, “Okay, but you need to sit down and rest again afterwards.” She came around in front of me and helped me stand up.

I hugged her and said, “Yes, dear.” She laughed, and we walked over to the nearest porta-potty.

When I came out I stretched and looked up at the sky. The sun was down. There were some clouds in the sky and it was cooling off quickly; we might not have as clear a sky as last night. The stars last night had been glorious.

Kendra walked up and put my arm in hers, smiling. She started leading me to a bench in front of the command tent.

“What’s the word? How are we doing?” I asked her.

“Everything nominal.” she replied. “The extra people on the sensor teams helped; they should start arriving in a few minutes. P-p reports all nominal.”

I nodded as I sat down in a reclining beach chair. “Good. Could you round up Carol and Kenny for me?”

Kendra gave me a stern look. “I’m sorry, doctor. I can get Carol for you, but you can’t talk directly to Kenny until Ahmed returns: protocol.”

I looked at her, noticing her gun again. The security protocols we’d worked out didn’t allow two of the encryption key holders to be in the same place unless all three were there. That explained her reaction to Kenny at dinner.

“I understand,” I told her, sighing. Then I got a smile. “Does that mean you’re with me?” I asked. Once our data archives went live, each of the key holders could not be left alone as part of the protocol.

She leaned over to me and smiled, kissing me on the forehead. “That’s right,” she whispered. “You’re all mine.” She stood up and waved to someone. One of the security guys (Peter?) came over. Kendra told him to find Carol, then asked me if I needed anything. I asked for some cookies and some 7-Up. Kendra told Peter, “Make that the sugar cookies, or the lemon ones. Do it.”

I chuckled as he took off; those were my favorites. “You are very observant my dear,” I told her.

She smiled and sat down in the chair beside me. Our refreshments arrived shortly, followed by Carol and one of her physics people. She was smiling; a good sign.

“So you understand why they hit nine plus, and can convince me we don’t need gamma?” I asked.

She pulled up another camp chair and sat down. “Yes. We’ve gone over the quick-look data, and revisited alpha. We’ve concluded two things. One, alpha had some bubbles in their explosive lenses. Two, propagation numbers for the explosives were off. Beta had clean lenses and also changed the detonation timing. We’ll have better revised models in an hour or so, but I expect them to show beta right at, or a little over nominal. Brain fart has the new coefficients and is working them in.”

I was impressed. “So alpha was almost a dud?” Hard to think of three as a dud, but that’s what it was if nominal was nine.

Carol nodded her head. “Yes, and that’s why we should go ahead with brain fart. We’ve exceeded our goals for the first series.”

Kendra said, “Bravo teams arriving,” a while before we heard the vans drive up. The whole site turned into chaos as the data analysis folks took over and the bravo teams started unloading. Carol stood up; I followed her gaze over to the medical tent. Miranda was leading Kenny out and over to his tent; he looked a little dazed. One of the medical people started walking to us. “Go,” I told Carol. She gave me a half wave and walked over to catch up to her husband.

One of the nurses (Patricia?) walked over to us. “Director, you turn please,” she said. Kendra helped me stand up. I didn’t remember what this was about, but I walked over with Kendra and went into the tent.

The tent was empty except for Janet, our psychologist, Anita, head of security, and one of her techs. Janet motioned me to an empty chair in front of her. I sat down and Kendra sat next to me. Anita put my right arm on the table and the tech (Carl?) fastened what looked like a medic alert bracelet around my right wrist. After it was fastened he put a plastic block with a cable coming out of it on top of the bracelet. The cable ran to a laptop. The bracelet fit into a recess in the bottom of the block. After about thirty seconds a green light came on and the block beeped. Anita and the tech left the tent. I watched them leave and saw two more security people at the tent entrance.

“Director, Dan,” Janet spoke to me. I turned and faced her. She was holding some paper. By her side were two cassette players with headphones attached. She reached out and held my head with both her hands. I felt a funny tingle as she touched me, and I remembered. This was part of our hypnotic conditioning; I was getting a new crypto key. I sighed and looked into her eyes. These sessions were always a bit strange, but very pleasant.

She smiled. “Good. I’m going to start counting now, from ten down to zero. Listen to my voice and relax; let it happen, as it has so many times before. Ten... Nine... Eight...”

She started counting and I felt very relaxed, very calm. I couldn’t keep my eyes open, and her voice seemed to be getting further and further away.

I think I had some wild dreams; some of them were not very nice, but I knew what I needed to do. Then things were very pleasant again. I heard Janet’s voice, and then Kendra’s, both coming from far, far away.

And then I woke up. I blinked my eyes and sat up. I took a deep breath and wiggled a bit; I’d been sitting in one spot for a while. Kendra was holding my hand. I looked at her; she was smiling. I looked back at Doctor Janet. She was smiling as well.

“How do you feel?” Janet asked.

“Other than sitting in the same place for too long, I feel great.” I looked at my right wrist. “I see I’ve got my new key.”

Janet looked very somber. “Yes. Let’s hope you have it for a long time.”

She stood up and helped Kendra and I stand. Part of me knew Kendra had been through similar conditioning. I hugged Janet. “Who’s left?” I asked.

She smiled. “Just Ahmed and Carol. We’ll wait for after the debrief. Can you two walk okay?”

Kendra put an arm around me and gave me a squeeze. “We’ll manage,” she said.

“Thank you, Janet,” I said, and Kendra and I walked out of the tent. The two security people saw us and walked away.

Carol walked over to us and gave us both a big hug. “How did it go?” she asked Kendra.

Kendra gave me a squeeze and said, “Just fine. It was easy.”

Carol held my hand for a moment. “Meeting in a half hour, Dad. Nothing but good news.” She walked off.

We started walking to the command tent. I was still a bit dazed; Kendra was walking a bit slow herself.

“I need to sit down for a bit.” A cold feeling ran through me. “No, I need you to hold me.” We turned and headed to my tent, just behind the command area. Kendra flagged down one of the security folks and told him to wake us in twenty minutes. We went into my tent. I smiled; the single cot was gone, replaced by a large air mattress on the ground, covered by two sleeping bags zipped together, and two pillows.

We lay down together. She held me to her breasts and I held her tight. I closed my eyes and held on, I didn't know why, but I held on tight. Hearing her heart beat I started relaxing after a little while. I realized my hands were clenched holding her. She squeezed me and I took a deep breath and let myself relax in her arms.

Decision time

We got our wake-up call and held each other for a while before heading to the command tent. I felt better, but still was somewhat uneasy. Kendra could sense it. We agreed to see Janet after the meeting.

Walking to the tent we met Carol and Kenny. I hugged them; I could feel Kendra's hand on my back as well. I looked at Kenny; he had a bracelet like mine on his right wrist, and a somber look on his face. I looked in his eyes, then at Kendra, and then to Carol. I looked to Carol's waist; she was wearing a holstered gun, just like Kendra. I knew what part of my unease was; I didn't want my baby girl or her husband to get hurt. "Carol," I told her softly, "you can get Miranda or one of the others to stay with you. You don't have to do this."

She sighed and put her arm around her husband, looking in his eyes. Without turning from him she said, "Daddy, we've talked it over, and we've talked with Janet about it at length. I'm the one." They held each other close. I put my hands on them for a moment, then walked away with Kendra.

We walked into the command tent and I sat down at the end, Kendra standing behind me. Everyone looked pleased and excited. The Beta folks looked a bit tired; Lucy and her brain fart squad looked eager; June was showing a little wear. Lucy rested her head in her hands for a moment, then saw I was looking at her and took her hands away quickly. I smiled.

"So can someone explain to a worn-out old engineer how two supposedly identical devices could produce such different results?" I asked the crowd. I scribbled a note on a piece of paper and handed it to Kendra as people laughed and the meeting came to order.

Ahmed's team had their data down cold. They figure alpha had at least one sizeable bubble, possibly two. And, the propagation velocities for the explosives had been off. They took those factors into account and were within six percent of the revised models all the way around. Tony put up the graphics for the calorimeter data for both alpha and beta; you could see alpha's distorted pattern, and a very pretty pattern for beta. When Tony finished running through the data he sat down. I nodded my head and started applauding; the others joined in.

"Good science, very good science. Damn good engineering too," I told them. Some people clapped Ahmed on the back; that was about the highest praise I'd given in a while.

Kendra handed me a note. As I fished for my reading glasses she leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Janet and Kenny both think it's a very good idea and will be ready for us." She gave me a little kiss on the ear and I stopped fishing.

The crowd had settled down. I turned to Lucy.

"Doctor Lucy... So tell me, how are things?"

She smiled; the gentle laughter from the group helped. She looked around the room, taking a deep breath.

“Brain fart is ready to go. We’ve reworked our models given the new propagation data. With June’s help and the help of the Beta crew we have a new sensor deployment. The graphics you saw are the result of June’s superb physics and Larry’s modeling over the last few hours; they’ve practically reinvented data collection and modeling. Everyone has pitched in to make it a success; we’re ready to go.”

I smiled. She was a good leader, praising the people around her.

“So what’s your best guess, I’m sorry, engineering estimate?”

She laughed a little, as did the others. She waited until the room got quiet, then waited a while longer.

She gave me an intense look and a smile. “Between two hundred eighty and three hundred ten.”

I know my eyebrows popped up. Some low whistles came from the crowd. I glanced over at Kenny, asked out loud, “Radiation precautions?” At those energy levels we might be seeing a lot of very energetic particles. Kenny nodded his head; I looked back to Lucy.

“In the plan. You know my view of those hypotheses.” She thought they were bull.

“It’s not your opinion I’m concerned with, it’s the opinion of a lot of very energetic particles zipping through my people,” I told her.

She smiled. “I understand. We’ve planned for the worst; the good Doctor has approved. We’ll be taking full precautions. We had dosimeters out on Beta, they all came out clean.”

I smiled. She’d done her homework, and gone a step farther by taking measurements on the Beta shot. Still, the dosimeters were integrating devices.

“Very good. Thank you. Let’s go around the room quickly then. Range Safety?”

I queried each of the team leads; they were all set.

I looked at Lucy. “Okay, it’s Brain Fart just before dawn. Lucy, you’re offline with me for the next hour.”

Kendra leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Two hours.”

“I’m sorry, my mouth was misinformed, two hours. You’ve got five minutes to check with your people. Thank you, all.” I stood up and the crowd started to disperse. Lucy looked a little shocked, but huddled with her folks.

I gave her six minutes, then walked over with Kendra.

“No, I don’t know what he... Ready, sir,” Lucy said as we walked up.

I laughed. “It’s not a big deal. Need a few more minutes?”

She smiled and said, “No, they know what they need to do. Now is about the best time for me anyway.”

I gave her my best Haughty Director look and said, “Good answer.”

Everyone laughed; they don’t take me seriously. Her team dispersed and she followed me as Kendra and I walked over to Janet’s tent.

“To what do I owe this honor?” she asked.

Janet met us at the entrance to the tent. Lucy looked startled and a little confused.

I looked her in the eye. “Lucy, I saw you resting your head on your hands. You need some rest. With Doctor Janet’s help, you’re going to get a much needed nap, so you’ll be at your best for the shot.”

Lucy opened her mouth to start to argue, then closed it and smiled. “Thank you. You’re right,” she said, then gave me a hug. She went in the tent with Janet.

I sighed and turned to walk away. I was hungry again, and knew where I could find some cookies, and maybe some leftover meat. The 80 meter ham band should still be open as well.

Kendra grabbed my arm. “Where do you think you’re going?”

I turned to face her. I started to talk, then thought better of it. She put her arms around my waist and held me; we were standing hip to hip, and it was nice.

“Janet will only be a few minutes. We’re waiting right here and then we’re going to talk to her. Something was bothering you earlier.”

The pleasure from my midsection was drowned out by the turmoil returning from deep inside. I nodded, then held her tight. I felt very old, and very lonely. I’d talked to Ian earlier in the week; I knew his prognosis was very grim, but he was going to fight it to the very end, as my wife had. That brought tears to my eyes and I started crying. Kendra quickly moved us inside the tent.

She held me as we stood there in the dim light. I thought I could hear Janet’s voice on the other side of the tent, but couldn’t make it out.

I dried up after a while and we sat down in rickety camp chairs to wait. Janet joined us, smiling as she pulled up another chair.

“How’s Lucy?” I asked, having to clear my throat a bit.

“She’s resting well. She’d been wondering how she was going to get the rest she knew she needed, so your suggestion was actually a great relief to her.” She reached out and put a hand on my leg. Kendra had an arm around my shoulder. “Now, what’s the matter? Do you know?”

I took a breath; it was ragged. I shook my head a little. “I feel old.” I wiggled my wrist with the key on it, pointed at the 9mm pistol on Kendra’s hip. “I understand the protocols, I agree with them, but I don’t want anyone hurt, least of all my baby girl...”

I felt hands squeezing my shoulders and my leg; they helped.

Janet spoke softly to me. “Dan, Kenny and Carol talked with me quite a bit; they know what they’re doing -- they are adults, husband and wife.”

I looked at her and my eyes filled with tears; these youngsters, they didn’t have kids, how could they understand? “She will always be our baby girl, and I’m the only one left to take care of her.” I closed my eyes and cried again.

It had been shortly after my wife Alice’s funeral, just a few days after, that Ian, Carol, and Kenny had first talked to me about their project, something we’d discussed a year or more before, but I’d thought it was just talk. They told me it was far more, and they needed my help. In a sense it had saved me, saved me from the grief and mourning, and had given me something to live for. But it had also left those feelings bottled up, until now.

As I cried I felt Janet move close to me, felt her hand on one shoulder, Kendra’s on the other shoulder as she held me from the other side. We held each other and it helped. Janet spoke to me, helping free the pain, then started having me breathe with her, getting control of my breath again. They started rocking me gently back and forth, then Janet started telling me to relax...

Then I was on my back, with a nipple in my mouth, and a woman on top of me, riding me... Kendra... It took me a few seconds to realize where I was, back in my tent, deep inside her. My God it felt so good. I held on and rocked, and rocked, and rocked, listening to her moan. I let go of her nipple so I could breathe deeper, holding her waist. I couldn’t believe the intensity, the sensation.

I was starting to wonder why I hadn’t come yet when she started moaning and shuddering on top of me. I felt her hair on my face, so soft, carrying the aroma of our campfires. Then she started whispering in my ear and I came like never before in my life.

It took a while for me to return to my senses. When I did, Kendra was laying alongside me propped up on an elbow. I rolled a little to her, putting an arm around her waist and resting my head between her young wonderful breasts.

“What did that witch doctor do to my mind?” I panted.

She jiggled as she laughed, and held me closer. “Exactly what I asked her to do. I can play you like a tin flute, and I’m going to do just that for a long, long time. Want to see another trick? It’s another one we’ll both enjoy.”

She moved me to a nipple, which I took graciously. Then I felt a hand behind my head holding me, so soft, gentle, and fulfilling. I heard her voice saying softly, “Sleep darling, I’ve got you, sleep darling.”

Cerenkov!

I woke up in the arms of a warm, soft, strong woman.

“Time to get up if you want to see the shot,” Kendra said.

I nestled in and enjoyed her charms a bit more. She laughed and pulled away from me, leaving me on my back.

“Is this the kind of treatment I have to look forward to?” I asked.

She laughed softly then ran a hand down my naked chest to my balls, sending shockwaves through me.

“Yes,” she said, then scrambled off the air mattress and turned on a light.

We dressed in silence. Well, she dressed in silence and I dressed in awe, looking at her. When we stepped out of the tent we hugged.

“Thank you for taking pity on an old man,” I whispered to her.

Her reaction was immediate and surprising. She pulled back from me and said, “Pity has nothing to do with it! You are very sexy, and in great condition...” She gave me a squeeze. “For an old goat.”

I laughed and we kissed. It was cool out, and the air felt damp. We grabbed our jackets and headed to the ridge, passing by the food tent.

We met Janet inside.

“How is Lucy?” I asked her.

She motioned me next to her on the bench. I sat down. “Lucy had a very good nap, woke up feeling great, and headed out to save the world. How are you feeling?”

I smiled. “Much better. Thank you.” I felt a hand on my back, and turned to see Kendra sitting down next to me. She had a cup of coffee, a can of 7-Up, and some sugar cookies. I sighed and shook my head a bit; they were taking such good care of me. “I hope Kendra doesn’t get tired of playing with her old toy.”

As she munched a cookie, Kendra said, “You’re not old, you’re just well broken in. And I’m going to enjoy it a lot, and so will you. I think both of us already have.”

I sighed and leaned on her shoulder. She held my head and I closed my eyes for a moment. I opened them again and saw Janet smiling at us.

I sat up and took Janet's hand. "I don't want any explanations. I just want to enjoy it. In fact if I want anything, I want you to make sure I don't question it. Will you do that for me? I'm serious now."

She kept smiling and nodded her head. "Yes, I can, but there's very little to explain. We all agreed it would be best."

I looked up to see Carol and Kenny standing by us, arms around each other, smiling. I felt better about my baby girl now. I knew she'd made her decision, but she'd always be my baby girl. I remembered how much she disliked me calling her that, especially as a teenager...

"So you all agreed, did you? Does that include you, sawbones, or did our resident witch get her tendrils into your head as well?"

Carol looked a little surprised, but Kenny kept smiling. "I agreed, Dad, but Janet had nothing to do with it. I'm entirely under someone else's spell." He kissed his wife on the neck.

I looked at Janet; she looked a little hurt. "I'm sorry, Janet; my bark is worse than my bite. Thank you for all you've done for us, and for me. I do appreciate it." I gave her a hug, which she returned.

When we leaned back she shook her head and told me, "You are incredible. It is an honor to work with you."

Kendra said, "We'd better get moving -- they won't wait for us."

We stood up and walked out of the tent, heading for our seats on the ridge a few hundred yards away.

I fell back and put an arm around Janet. "How long did you spend on me?" I asked.

She sighed. "About an hour and a half. You needed it, it was time, long past time."

"Did Kendra get dragged through the whole thing?"

"Yes. I asked her to leave, but she insisted on being there. I'm actually glad she was."

I nodded as we walked along. Kendra was leading the way, Carol and Kenny following, another security person behind Janet and me.

"And you gave her the keys to my head?"

Janet laughed and gave me a squeeze. "I thought you didn't want to know. Yes, there are specific posthypnotic suggestions and triggers she can use, besides the ones for the protocols. And to answer a question you won't ask because you don't want to, her feelings toward you are entirely her own. You are an incredible man. Did you know Miranda and Kendra actually fought to see who'd get you?"

I harumphed. "And Kendra lost..."

Janet laughed; I could feel her shaking her head, feel her hair brush against me.

"No, she won, but I'm not sure how legitimately."

"Good, a girl after my own heart then..."

"Yes, she's after your heart as well as your body. Take good care of her."

I harumphed again. "As if I had any choice..."

"No choice at all, if you want to look at it that way -- no choice at all!"

We exited the trees and stepped out on to the ridge overlooking the valley. It was still a while to sunrise. Low fog misted the valley. There were some chairs by the cameras.

"Where's the site?" Kenny asked as we sat down.

One of the techs tried to point it out to us. He handed around some image intensifiers that also picked up the infrared; I thought I could see some warm spots on the valley floor.

"Carol, what was the estimate again? Two sixty to three ten?"

"Yep, but I'd guess more like four hundred," she said.

My mind wandered a bit. "If we can do it, I'd like one of the cameras at each site moved to wide angle, as wide as you can get. Do we have the time for that?"

Carol picked up her radio and barked out orders. I was a little taken aback by the commanding voice coming from our baby girl!

"It was only a suggestion..." I said, still quite surprised at her tone of voice.

She laughed, as did the others. "Yes, Dad, just like your suggestion with the calorimeters. What are you looking for?"

It was my turn to laugh. "I'm not sure; it's just a hunch with the fog. How long until we find out?"

Kendra said, "About three minutes."

Carol laughed again. "I know, Wilson..."

"I raised a bright girl. Right you are. Charles Wilson. For ten more points, what year?"

A young voice behind us said, "1912 for the invention, 1927 for the Nobel."

I looked behind me, but didn't see who'd made the remark. "Right. If you know that, why are you standing out on this ridge freezing your balls off?"

More laughter -- as "director" I could use whatever language I pleased.

"For the same reason you're here, sir -- it's the best seat in the house."

I stood up. "Then come over here and sit down. I want to stand up."

I was startled to see a teenage boy come forward, sixteen, maybe seventeen years old.

"What's your name?"

"Glaser, sir."

I thought for a moment. I'd seen him around the camp, and heard of him -- he was a good tech. "Your grandfather named Donald?"

The boy smiled. "Yes, sir." I shook his hand and waved him to the chair.

"Have a seat. You come from a long line of physicists." The boy sat down and I clapped him on the shoulders. His grandfather turned Wilson's cloud chamber into the bubble chamber and won the 1960 Nobel prize for physics. His mother was a superb physicist, one of the best on the confinement team. I almost said, "Remember this day," but I knew he would. Still, my eyes teared up again as I stood next to Kendra, my arm going around her waist, and hers going around mine. If I couldn't have grandkids, could I dare think about more of my own? At my age? Would that be fair to them? To her?

She held her left arm up; I could see the blue green glow of her watch; it must be close.

"Radio silence, automatic sequence, 15 seconds, mark," she said softly.

I was torn between her watch and the mist in the valley below. I settled on the valley. After a bit she jiggled me and whispered, "Breathe!"

I sighed out a breath. God help us all.

"Five, four, three, two, one."

I'd expected to see a pinprick of light diffused in the fog, maybe some tracks, but I was relying on our high-speed cameras to capture that.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw, what those cameras recorded. I saw streaks, and they curved. More than that, I saw a brilliant blue-violet cone of light appear and curve out from the desert floor below us, extending through the fog bank. Why did they curve?

Carol said, "My God, dad..."

The youngster in front of me shouted, “Cerenkov!”

I squeezed his shoulder. “Yes! But why was it curved?” I shouted.

Kendra’s voice snapped me back to the present. She had her radio in her hand and said, “Anita this is Kendra -- we’ve been spooked.”

I grabbed the radio, punched the button and said, “This is Dan. I concur. We’ve been spooked.”

That flash had to have been visible for many miles. We were assuming we’d have visitors, both to the site and to our camp. The plans were made; now we were putting them into action.

Kendra took control. “Everyone, clear this area. Take the chairs and everything else. This is not a drill.”

I grabbed a chair and hustled back to the command tent. Anita met me.

“What happened?” she said, panic in her face.

“We had a flash visible through the whole valley. How are the test site teams?”

Miranda came up beside me. “They’re making their pickup runs now, no injuries but reports of physiological effects. Vehicles intact.”

I nodded and looked to Anita. “Have them rendezvous at the backup point?”

Anita nodded and said, “I concur.”

We looked at Miranda; she held up her radio and spoke clearly. “This is security. Recovery plan blue. Recovery plan blue. Confirm.”

I heard a shaky voice from the radio say, “Confirming plan blue. What a trip. Out.”

That would be the last we heard from them for a while. Meanwhile the camp was in mild chaos, reorganizing for expected visitors. Some of the equipment would be packed up immediately; our spectrum analyzers were no longer needed. The x-ray equipment had already been packed, the liquid nitrogen vented. I huddled with Anita, Miranda, and Kendra for a few minutes. Anita’s p-p teams hadn’t intercepted any “interesting” communications; we might just get away with it. Our little gadget had caused havoc on the radio waves; we were still hearing the “What was that?” chatter on every radio band.

After a few minutes I started looking around for Carol; how well had we done? I saw her at one of the tables, shaking her head, some of her physicists and one of the quick-look telemetry people with her. I walked over with Kendra attached to my side.

“What is it, baby?” I said, bending down next to her.

She looked at me with a look of shock, amazement, and I don't know what. She shook her head and said, "Sit down."

Kendra practically pulled the chair out from under the physicist next to me and put me in it. I held one of Carol's hands.

She gave me more of that bewildered smile. "It was at least six eighty. That's six hundred eighty -- at least. We won't know how much higher for a while because it pegged our quick-look instruments."

Six hundred eighty -- at least. No wonder we had Cerenkov radiation! I shook my head and looked down at some of the quick-look telemetry graphs. On the first one I looked at, I saw the characteristic rise, and then...

"What the hell is *this*?" I said, pointing to a sudden hump in the graph, after which it took off to the top of the page!

Carol shook her head, smiling. "I have no idea. Hopefully Lucy does."

My mind was racing again, figuring propagation velocities, fields, integrating, "But it curved, the Cerenkov, and the particle tracks..."

Carol nodded her head, smiling. "So the mag fields had the time to propagate before the particle fields hit them."

"And decelerated, with constructive interference, but they curved, baby!"

We were both almost hysterical, laughing, as Carol said, "I know, daddy! I saw it too!"

What an incredible puzzle! Cerenkov radiation is a sort of a subatomic sonic boom; particles shedding excess energy, releasing photons.

That triggered another thought. I turned to Kendra. "Where's Kenny? Radiation effects?" She picked up her radio and made a call. We'd quite obviously kicked up a major swarm of high-energy particles. That could mean trouble for our people. My mind raced through the protocols; we had the radiation protocol in effect, so the detector recovery teams wouldn't go in if the area was hot. They'd gone in -- I'd heard that. So at worst it was within limits.

Kendra leaned over between us and said, "Test area clear. All teams away. No health problems, some equipment damage."

At those energy levels, I wasn't surprised we had equipment damage.

"Lithium pinch?" I wondered aloud.

Carol went pale; one of the other physicists at the table said, "Oh my God..."

Anita walked up, looking troubled. I pointed to the double-hump in the graph.

“You’ve got someone who understands bhangmeters, right?”

Anita turned a bit more pale. “Oh shit -- yeah, Pookie. I’ll get her.”

“And we’ll need to know what birds were overhead -- GPS and commercial,” Carol threw in. Smart girl, my daughter.

“Right -- two minutes,” said Anita, and she trotted off muttering obscenities.

A thermonuclear “device” detonating in the atmosphere produces a distinctive double-humped pulse of light. “Bhangmeter” was the name given to the optical sensor developed to detect such pulses. They were originally carried by the Vela satellites, and now by all military birds, which includes GPS satellites, and a lot of people suspected they were also on many commercial birds.

Anita came trotting back, followed by a young woman, short, dressed in sweats.

Pookie -- I remembered her. We got her from LockMart. In spite of her somewhat mousy looks, she was fucking brilliant -- and I remembered how we got her from LockMart, or more precisely, why LockMart got rid of her. This should be interesting.

I heard a yelp as Kendra threw another physicist off his chair, bringing it up next to me so Pookie could sit down.

Anita said, somewhat out of breath, “Two of the nine GPS birds overhead were the newer Block III birds -- plus some commercial stuff. We’re looking at weather maps to place local lightning storms -- that may help.

Pookie gave me an intense smile, looking at me through her thick glasses.

“I designed the bhangmeters for all the newer birds,” she told us.

I pointed to the graph. “What are they going to think of this?”

She looked down, then sucked wind. Her arms went in front of her body, her hands jammed between her legs. “The scales are accurate?” she asked.

“Plus or minus five percent on amplitude, tighter than that on times,” Carol told her.

“Spectral distribution?” Pookie asked.

Carol pulled out another sheet. “We figured we’d need that, but we’re still cooking the data -- here’s a first cut.”

Pookie nodded, looking over the data. She closed her eyes and her head tipped back. She started rocking in the chair.

Kendra, who had been sitting on the other side of her, stood up. She shoed people away, then stood behind Pookie and me.

Pookie slid one hand into her sweat pants, rocking more, starting to moan. This was the behavior which had gotten her thrown out of LockMart -- when faced with a really tough problem, something clicked inside her. An answer would come out of her -- if she came first. She needed to come, quickly and hard.

I could tell she was on a fast track. She had a reputation on the project for being intensely sexual, and an animal in bed, an animal few could satisfy.

As she moaned, rocking, she said, "Hold me."

I put my arms around her, and Kendra squeezed her shoulders. That ratcheted her breath up a few notches. The pitch and volume of her moaning shifted as well -- she was close.

Kendra leaned down and whispered to me, "Grab a nipple, under her sweats -- now!"

I did as I was told, sliding a hand up on her warm skin, pushing her bra out of the way, and grasping a breast. I rolled her nipple between my fingers. I looked at her face. Kendra was doing something, maybe sticking a tongue in her ear. I leaned over and bit her neck.

Pookie shuddered as we held her, making incoherent but very pleasurable noises, her head flopping around.

She went semi-limp on us for a few breaths, then raised her head. She turned to Kendra, drew her head down, and kissed her on the lips. Then she turned to me, almost moving into my lap, and planted a doozie on me, my hands slipping around to hold her back.

With another breath or two, the animal subsided and the researcher surfaced again.

She turned to the table, and the graphs. She moved the pages with her left hand. She started to point to something with her right, but then turned and put her index finger in my mouth. It was covered with her juices, and was she tasty...

"As you probably know," she said, returning to business as if nothing had happened, "the problem with bhangmeters is distinguishing actual events from other sources, such as lightning strikes, especially temporally close strikes. Signal processing in modern instruments computes a figure of merit for an event, based on a number of parameters. Rise time of the initial pulse, its duration, and the ratio of the peak to the dip here, are important. As is the rise time of the second part of the hump. Spectral distribution is also important. Rise time and amplitude of the second hump are good indicia of overall device yield."

She glanced around the table before continuing.

“Now this, ignoring the time scale, looks like a valid event. The shape of the first pulse, the depth of the notch with respect to the first peak, all look like a valid event. But the time scale is way off. The second hump starts out like a valid event, but I don’t know what the hell *this* is,” she said, pointing to where the line took off for the top of the graph. She looked at Carol.

Carol said, “Neither do we, yet.”

“Lithium pinch, secondary reactions?” I suggested. “We didn’t have anything like a reference standard fuel in there -- liddy or worse, but the batteries were lithium hydroxide, plenty of lithium-7.”

Anita pulled us back to the issue at hand. “Irrelevant -- what did the bhangmeters report to their masters?”

Pookie turned, looking up at Anita. “Two answers -- old sensors will ignore it and not report anything. New sensors -- if they’re still using my signal processing, they’ll kick it out as a zoo event, that means anomalous, for a human to examine, as the envelope looks valid. Standard procedure is to correlate with other sensors. Here, you’ll have the two new birds telling command something weird happened, and all the old birds saying nothing interesting happened.”

“Can they download data to examine it?” Carol asked.

Pookie shook her head, smiling. “Only on the new birds -- not enough memory in the old ones. Plus, if they pass over a lot of storm activity, storage might get reclaimed, although with my design, anomalous events stick around longer in case someone wants to look at them.”

“That makes ascending passes good and descending bad,” muttered Anita.

I leaned back. Kendra put her hands on my shoulders and squeezed. I sighed.

“So, we’ve got a chance then.”

Anita said, “Yeah, a chance both ways -- just what we need. I need orbital data.”

I nodded. “Okay, here’s my take. Keep family groups together, but release the early teams. Let’s start wrapping things up. Quickly, but orderly -- no need for panic.”

Carol nodded. “I concur.”

Anita nodded. “No need to panic -- yet.”

“Are the calorimeters coming back here?” I asked.

Anita nodded. “Yes, we have one van coming back here, with the calorimeters, and some damaged equipment. We want to triage it.”

Triage -- that brought up another item. “How about our mice? Our people? How did they do?”

Carol gave me the answer on that one. “We lost at least half of the mice. Some reports of pulse effects, quick look at dosimeters is inconclusive as they’re integrating devices. Kenny is set up to run people.”

“Should we bring in the whole team, and have them checked?” I suggested.

Anita said, “We’ll bring in the close crew, and the pickup crew. The back crew, and far telemetry I recommend we send off as ordered earlier -- on-site triage cleared them.”

Carol nodded. “I have to agree, dad -- I know you’re concerned about the people, but we also have to be concerned for the project.”

I nodded -- always tradeoffs to be made. I hated it when they involved people.

“Any unusual surveillance activity? Did we leave a crater?”

“No indications of increased activity. Anybody visiting the site will sure as hell know *something* happened, although it’s not at all clear what,” Anita told us.

Kendra did something to my shoulders and neck. I let my eyes close, resting my head against her. “Okay,” I said, “then I guess we wait for the scheduled debrief, and let people do their jobs. Let me know if things change.”

“Right,” said Anita. Someone patted me on the leg -- think it was Carol.

“Thank you, Doctor Carter,” I added, thanking Pookie.

I felt arms go around me and give me a hug. “Thank you, Sir,” she said, “My talents are at your disposal.” She gave me a peck on the cheek, and slid a hand down my stomach as she bit my neck.

I heard and felt Kendra laughing softly behind me. I opened my eyes. “What’s so damn funny now?” I asked.

She pulled me to my feet, putting an arm around me. “That was an invitation, in case you hadn’t noticed. You ought to take her up on it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Is that a recommendation based on personal experience?”

Kendra smiled and squeezed me. “It is. But right now, you need some rest.”

She started walking me to our tent.

“Am I likely to get any?” I whispered.

She laughed.

She stopped us at the porta-potties. She turned me to one and ordered, "Go!"

"Yes, dear," I replied. She swatted me on the bottom as I went in.

Six eighty -- at least -- we'd met our goals for this phase -- in spades. Hell, we'd probably initiated a secondary fusion reaction, that was my guess at least, the Li-7 in the batteries spitting out a tritium, the styrafoam jacketing, the inner aluminum case and polystyrene liner forming the hohlraum... Damn, it had been a long time since I worked with that stuff... Alpha, neutron, and a tritium? But that meant we created a swarm of fast neutrons to get things started... We might be able to put the tokomak people out of business. What kind of equipment damage had we done? That would be interesting.

"You okay in there?" came Kendra's voice as she banged on the door.

"Yeah, yeah -- let me finish up," I told her. I almost said, "damn bossy women," but thought better about it.

I exited with a smile, looking around at the morning sunrise.

"Beautiful morning! What are we going to do now?" I asked innocently.

Kendra had buckled her belt -- mainly to hold up her Glock, I think, as her Levis were still unzipped. She took my arm and started walking us purposefully to the tent.

"So, do you think I should accept Pookie's invitation?" I suggested as we entered the tent.

"Strip!" Kendra commanded in a soft voice.

I laughed. I could tell she was aroused -- she's glorious when she's aroused.

I was standing on one leg, slipping off my pants when I said, "I must admit, she tasted really good."

Kendra grabbed me and threw me to our bed. I tried to get the upper hand, at least for a while. I wanted to go down on her, but she wasn't letting go of me. We slid together and she locked her legs around mine. We were kissing from head to toe, her bucking underneath me.

"I'm not going to last long like this," I managed to tell her.

She paused and rolled us over. "We can't have that," she said, rearranging herself to put a nipple in my mouth.

I hadn't had a nipple that young, firm, and delicious in decades -- or had it been a few hours ago? It must have been that witchcraft Janet put into me, I don't know. Kendra whispered something as she held me, and things just got better and better. She rode me until she came, which wasn't long, then squeezed me, held me, and rocked me to paradise. I went to sleep afterwards in her strong embrace.

“We need to get up,” she whispered some time later. I was wrapped up in her. It’s so nice to be able to find a nipple, without even opening your eyes. I settled in.

“Oh all right, for just a little while,” she whispered with a lilt and a sigh in her voice.

We did get up after a few more minutes. I was looking forward to a housemate.

“I bet you’re going to make me watch my diet and have me do sit-ups,” I accused her as we dressed.

She laughed. “I think you’ll do whatever I ask you to do...”

I leaned over and hugged her. “And I’ll love it -- ignore what I say though -- my bark is worse than my bite.”

“I know,” she said, kissing the top of my head. “I’m going to take very good care of you.”

“And I’ll do my best for you,” I told her, emotion suddenly strong in my voice.

We hugged again. She said, “Come on, we’ve got time for breakfast.”

We headed back out into the early morning air. We’d only slept a couple of hours, but it felt like longer. It felt grand to have someone’s arm around my waist again.

Walking through camp, there seemed to be fewer people around, and less equipment. We saw the occasional group heading off, exchanging hugs. I waved back to one carload as it headed out.

The food tent was doing a good business, with a queue. I started heading for the end, but Kendra steered me to a table.

“Sit. I’ll take care of this,” she told me.

I almost muttered, “Yes, dear,” but didn’t want to push my luck.

I looked around and spotted a place to sit. But as I turned, I saw something more interesting -- sitting in a corner eating breakfast were Pookie and the young Mister Glaser. Both looked quite healthy, with a rosy glow about them. Well, young Glaser looked a bit worn out... I walked over to them.

“Doctor Carter, Mister Glaser, good morning,” I said, standing near them.

Pookie looked up to me with a feral smile. Glaser looked surprised and forced a smile. I guess he was too pooped to make a run for it.

“Good morning,” Pookie said, looking me in the eye.

“Ah, good morning, sir,” Glaser added.

I couldn’t help it; I chuckled, trying to keep some composure. “So, what’s up?” I asked them. It was one of my standard openings.

Pookie gave Glaser a quick glance, then looked back to me. “I’m trying to convince him not to be a wuss. He wants to go to MIT. CalTech is better.”

I put my right foot on the bench, then rested my right hand on my knee so my MIT Brass Rat ring was clearly visible to both of them. “Oh, I don’t know about that...”

That didn’t slow Pookie down a bit. “Things have changed a lot since you were there, sir,” she told me.

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh? They did have electricity and indoor plumbing when I went.”

Pookie grinned at me. Glaser looked confused.

I chuckled a little more. “Have fun, kids,” I said, and turned to leave them alone.

I walked to an empty table and waved at Kendra as she approached carrying a tray.

She’d gotten me toast, scrambled eggs, bacon, and a bottle of hot sauce -- Cholula, my favourite.

“What’s Glaser doing around here? I’d thought he’d be gone,” I asked as I built a bacon sandwich.

Kendra mumbled something through a mouthful of eggs. When her mouth cleared, she said, “He’s a wizard with microelectronics and surface-mount stuff. The tech team say he’s got great hands and quite a talent.”

I chuckled. “Great hands -- so that’s why Pookie grabbed him -- makes sense...”

Kendra looked at me in shock, glanced around, and started to get up. I put a hand on her arm. “Sit down. That’s an order. Let the kids have fun.”

She sat down, then grinned at me. “Jealous?”

I frowned. “Of course! I didn’t get laid until I was almost twenty -- too busy studying, I guess.”

She laughed. “I’ll make sure medical gives them both a thorough check.”

“Somehow I think Pookie has checked him out pretty well...”

Kendra sighed and shook her head. “You really are a dirty old man...”

EMP

I smiled. “Why thank you my dear... Like to come home with me and see my etchings?”

She smiled and reached over to hold my hand. “I’m going home with you -- I’m looking forward to it.”

Now why the hell did she have to go and say a thing like that -- my eyes started to water. Must have been the hot sauce.

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